

Cases

Creating one team that respects one another and enjoys coming to work: Business unit culture change at a professional services firm

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Abstract

Growth Coaching International was asked to help a management team in a professional services firm in Sydney Australia change their culture by becoming more respectful of their colleagues and a happier place to work. 12 professional high achievers make up this team. They were very capable in their own right. However the team had been behaving in a dysfunctional and competitive way. The leader of this team was very keen to get this team back on track and to create a culture of unity and respect. The team facilitated their own team workshop 3 months beforehand using a problem-focused approach but had no success. Growth Coaching were engaged to work with the leader and the team over a 6-month period. The project included individual coaching sessions for the leader and 2 workshops and follow up meetings with the team. In just 4 months the team have experienced significant changes in their culture and their interactions.

Context – “The Problem”

At the end of April 2011, I met with the General Manager of one of the business units and the Human Resources General Manager of a professional services firm in Sydney,

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Australia. During this meeting I was briefed on the challenges the management team were facing at that time, mainly the dysfunctional and competitive behaviour of a core of the team.

The General Manager of the team (I will call her Hannah to maintain confidentiality for her and her team) in this meeting described what had been happening over the past 2 years – a major restructure and a focus on setting up each team’s portfolios. During this time, each manager responsible for their portfolio with their own teams became quite competitive with other managers to the point where it created conflict between teams and heated arguments between a few of the managers.

Hannah described in detail (quite explanation-focused as mentioned by McKergow, 2008) what was happening and how her team had recently been rated lowest across the entire business on the Engagement Survey score at 27% (a company-wide Employee Survey to gauge satisfaction and engagement; the average for the rest of the business was 40%). Turnover was becoming one of the highest across the entire business as well. Hannah was desperate for help to change what she described as a “*highly dysfunctional team*” into one that:

- Could work as One Team,
- Trusted and respected each other,
- Created a good place to work for all their team members.

Hannah was quick to respond with “*Yes that is what I want!*” Clearly a “customer for change”.

Our approach

In our discussions Hannah had mentioned that the team had themselves facilitated a team-building workshop a few months previously. It was important to take this work into account, as well as the commitments they made into anything

I proposed. At the end of the meeting I said to Hannah that I thought that we needed to work together (if she was open to it). I would conduct individual coaching sessions with her, as well as team coaching sessions with her team of managers. Hannah was very keen to follow this approach. As I reflected on this meeting I was eager to show Hannah my commitment and support by getting a proposal back to her as quickly as possible as I could see her desire to get going.

During the meeting with Hannah, she gave me all the notes from the February 2011 workshop of what had been discussed. Looking at these notes I was conscious of not going over the same things that had already been covered. I wanted to continue the work already started and not come in as the expert and discount all previous work, but rather establish a partnership approach adopting a beginner's mind – not the expert (Miller & McKergow, 2011). The proposal outlined a full 6-month process. This review will focus on the first team workshop.

What I did – Tools, principles, simplicity, responsiveness

Team Workshop One – June 2011

The pre-workshop email was sent out 5 days before the workshop and what I noted was that no-one responded to my email, except for one person who could not make it and was sending her apologies. This seemed indicative of the disengagement I had heard described by Hannah, that they were only focused on their world and what was important to them. I was conscious to remain neutral and not read anything into the lack of response.

Before we started I had set up a few flipcharts on the wall with the following quotes, which I had taken from *The Solutions Focus* book (Jackson & McKergow, 2007):

- *“Leadership is not something you give me or I decide to take, we co-construct it between us by both our behaviours”*

- *“People are people through other people” Xhosa proverb*
- *“The main route to the world treating us differently is for us to initiate a different way of treating the world”*
- *“Change occurs when someone does something differently or looks at something differently”.*

I wanted to set the scene of change, taking responsibility, and to emphasise the importance of the interaction when the team walked into the room.

Welcome and opening

The workshop began with Hannah providing some opening remarks. I asked her to cover the following:

1. *What are you most pleased about in terms of the progress the team has made since last February – the first workshop?*
2. *Purpose of today’s session and Annette working with the team over the next 6 months.*
3. *Her hopes for today’s session.*

Finding Counters

In my opening I mentioned how impressed I was with what they had achieved in the workshop in February. This was to create a positive relationship with the whole team instantly and to demonstrate that I wanted to build on the work already started (present counters). Individually they listed what they had noticed was better since the February workshop, starting to highlight the counters that were already present. Then a whole group debrief happened. A whole page of counters were listed on what was better, things like – *more transparency, culture is more of a priority, more catch ups, more available to others, more forward planning, more approachable, more conscious effort to learn about each other* and many more. Each time they mentioned a counter I showed

my enthusiasm for each comment and at the end expressed how impressive this list was and that quite an effort had been made since the February workshop.

After counters we moved onto what they wanted to achieve from this workshop – what was key. I realised that team members had not brought into the workshop any notes on the pre-workshop questions, so I decided in the moment not to go through every question. We then moved to ground rules that they had established back in February. I checked these were still relevant and that it was important to continue using these (I wanted to work with what was there) as well as adding a few I was wanting to become a norm of the group.

They were:

Your ground rules

- We are one team
- Address the problem not the person
- Respect and work as peers together
- Call the behaviour

My ground rules

- Listen actively
- Be open and honest
- Maintain confidentiality
- See the good in others

Maintaining confidentiality was critical for the team to feel safe with each other so I emphasised what exactly this was, using the old saying. . . “*What goes on tour stays on tour*”.

Platform – getting commitment for the change

Hannah had highlighted to me what she wanted from the whole 6-month process – ***Creating One Team that respects one another***. Now was an opportunity to see if this was the same for all team members. All agreed that it was, so then I

asked them what the *headline statement* would be for what they are wanting over the next six months. Is it what Hannah had outlined or was it something different. The team brainstormed many options including football themes of “*you will never walk alone*”. Finally one headline captured everyone’s interest: “***Our team – United hearts and minds***”. They were all ready to be “*customers for change*” (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). I asked them if we were to take some small steps today to start moving towards this, were they prepared to take these, and they all agreed they were.

Creating connections with other team members – Affirming

The platform building created the beginnings of a sense of camaraderie between team members. Now they were ready to start building stronger relationships with each other. The team were asked to think about a personal or professional achievement over the last few years. To start, I explained that I would like them to listen for strengths, qualities and skills that they heard this person had that enabled them to achieve this achievement. Affirming was a way this group could start to connect with the good in others (Jackson & McKergow, 2007).

Some amazing stories started to emerge e.g. *Learning to surf and conquering a fear of sharks; recruiting this team-particularly more technically capable; taking her mother to America for 5 weeks because she had not had a relationship with her when she was young; changing careers when she was already at a very senior level; completing a Master’s degree with 3 young children – including one with a disability*. This was a very powerful exercise and relationships started to form from hearing these wonderful examples of achievement. Each person was affirmed by the whole team after their story of achievement, using words like “*so what I am impressed with . . .*”. I really could see the team were forming deeper relationships with each other and could appreciate each other from another perspective. Qualities and strengths that were reflected back included: perseverance,

courage, risk taking, confidence in own ability, good eye for quality people, ability to recognise strengths and talents in others and not feel threatened by that, relationship and client focused, facing fears, empathy, being positive, possibility focused and ability to see a way through.

After all stories and affirming were complete, the team debriefed the impact the affirming had on each of them and the team. Lovely comments like *“I felt valued by the group; you could connect to another person as a human not their role; it felt good, broke down barriers; you could see the team connecting better”*. I felt this exercise really moved the team to a very different positive place where it had not been before.

Future Perfect

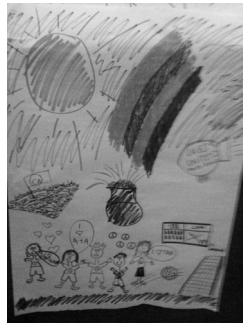
The team now seemed ready to develop their Future Perfect. The miracle question seemed to be the perfect SF tool to use at that moment. I asked the team the miracle question. *“So suppose tonight you go home . . . and do all your normal things . . . and during the night when you are asleep a miracle occurs, . . . but you do not know this as it happens when you are asleep. What will be the first thing you notice in the morning to show that the miracle has occurred?”* I asked them individually to record what they would notice at home, then when they arrived at work. I then began to list on an electronic whiteboard all their comments, and then the team was on a roll. Wonderful examples of what they would see, what others noticed in them (their teams, other people in other divisions, their clients, senior managers etc.), and what they would notice about interactions with each other. This went on for quite a while I continued to ask *“what else”* numerous times. I praised the team for a very extensive list of what the future could look like.

To make this list come alive, the group formed two groups of four. Their task was to create one flipchart per group titled *“A day in the life of this team”*. They created a picture of what this team would look like if the Future Perfect was

happening. I gave them 20 minutes to complete this. The pictures were amazing and I could not help notice the laughter and fun that was happening. This team looked like they were breaking down barriers and connecting on a positive level (Miller & McKergow, 2011 citing Wittgenstein, complexity and narrative emergence).

When the groups presented back they could not help but notice the similarities of their pictures – both had created a football theme by drawing football fields, having goals, both had rainbows and pots of gold. These pictures were quite symbolic of where they were wanting to get to, which I felt was a great way to help the team to become cohesive and have a common vision.

Future Perfect – “Day in the life” drawings



Scaling – Where are we now?

The next step was to use the scaling tool on where they were currently. Where did they think the team was currently on a scale of 1–10? Scores ranged from 4–6 with each team member explaining what they saw was already there that enabled them to give that score. At this point I was searching for counters like a “forensic scientist” (Jackson & McKergow, 2007, p. 11) using language like “*What gets you to this score? Wow, you are that high. What do you see in place already. . . ?*”

Small Actions

The last task was to agree some small actions to take over the next few weeks until the next team check-in. I asked the group to “*Think about what would be some small actions you could take over the next few weeks to start you moving one point up the scale towards your Future Perfect*” (Jackson & McKergow, 2007). The team came up with 17 actions they thought they could realistically take. The team decided on 5 small actions that the whole team could focus on over the next few weeks. I mentioned that it is not to say they could not focus on the other actions as well but these had highest commitment as a team.

They agreed to:

- Help steer conversations to the positive and be positive generally
- Actively listen to each other
- Celebrate success
- Make an effort to have a personal chat
- Make time for your team

Final review of session – What worked!

Before the team left the workshop I was keen to capture what had worked in this workshop, as the mood was very positive. I asked the group what had been useful and what had become clearer from that day’s workshop?

They responded with “*I did not know that about another person*”, “*How effective it is working on the positive and not the problems*”. This was a great start for this team. Hannah stayed behind after everyone else left. She was so happy it had gone so well.

My workshop review

- I was delighted by the change in mood of the team from the beginning to the end of the workshop. It was quite an obvious shift.
- A new team member to the team (only 5 weeks) made observations on all the good that was happening. These fresh eyes made longer-serving team members sit back and think – actually it is not so bad after all.
- Hannah looked joyful during and at the end of the workshop. You could see on her face the pressure had been released and she was now feeling confident the team were going to take responsibility to reach the Future Perfect.
- I was conscious of being flexible to what emerged in the moment. I wanted to be very mindful and pick up all the nuances of the group, in particular ‘staying on the surface’ (Korman & McKergow, 2009).
- I felt one team member was very down and disengaged in her mood. I chose not to explore this but it did have an “elephant in the room” feel. I felt I needed to develop more trust with the group before addressing issues like this.
- I did not need to use the technique of “hot topics” list, as it did not seem to be relevant.

What’s better?

For Hannah

- Sense of relief she is not in this alone.
- She has more techniques to use in her leadership and

leading her team out of this situation – particularly – SF tools, affirming, seeing and working with what is already there (counters), understanding the importance of the interaction, and keeping her language simple.

- Hannah sees she has strengths and qualities to utilise now.
- Hannah has started to model the way.

For the team

- Team members starting to form deeper relationships and connections with each other.
- Team has something to work towards – Future Perfect that they are all committed to.
- Sense of enthusiasm is beginning to build rather than competitiveness.

Lessons learnt

- Be flexible in approach – ‘stay at the surface’ about what is happening in the moment.
- Don’t make assumptions of where the team is at based on what you are briefed on. I was pleasantly surprised at the scores the team gave themselves. The scores did not reflect a team in dire straits! They had progressed quite a way, which I think surprised them.
- Be open to the fact that there are multiple realities – the briefing I was given was only Hannah’s and the HR Manager’s view. I had to remain open to other perspectives.
- The power of the facilitator being positive and modelling affirming and reacting with enthusiasm – this is catchy!
- Generally seeing the good in others and what is already working.
- I think I moved off the platform too quickly focusing on the headline without exploring what each person wanted other than in brief terms.

- The invitation email worked in relation to “host leadership” (McKergow, 2009) and inviting them to attend and be involved.
- Not say ‘my ground rules’ but workshop ground rules.
- Use the question – what has been better? In the first team check-in to further progress what was working and commitment and momentum.
- Being my first attempt at applying SF in a formal way, I was totally convinced of the amazing power of the tools.

What has happened since the workshop?

It is now October 2011, and three more team check-in sessions of 2 hours each and another half day workshop held in September have been conducted since the initial workshop in June 2011. As well as team sessions, 4 individual coaching sessions have been conducted with Hannah. Hannah is so positive now and is influencing other managers in the organisation to be the same.

Scoring against the Future Perfect for September – Ranged from 6 – 7/10 (when scored in June, ratings were between 4 and 6). A significant shift has been made in just a few months.

Counters

The team noticed what had enabled the scores to be so high (6–7/10)

- Collaboration already happening
- People work as a team
- Improvements made on structure
- Smiling, positive interactions
- More laughter
- More sweets!
- People leaving earlier
- More natural social activities

- More understanding
- Less whinging
- More people approaching other people's desks
- Fewer emails
- More relaxed

The only conundrum is that clearly the team have shifted in a dramatic way. However, the organisation measures engagement through a survey that is conducted every 3 months and the change in this team's score has only been small – from 27% to 34%. The challenge for me has been to help the team focus on those small percentage improvements rather than focusing on what is still not right. Even “*small change can make the biggest difference*” and “*focus on what is working and do more of it*” (mantras of the SF approach). However it is still a challenge given the team knows and experiences that they have changed significantly but the organisational measure is not reflecting that change as much as the team would like. The next step – is the organisation measuring the right things to truly measure engagement!

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